

Business. As Usual

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Tim Woodward: I was on a video call with Anthea Duffy last week and your recent exhibition came up in conversation. I was saying how much I liked *Business. As Usual*. Anthea was quick to realise that I'd misinterpreted the register and volume of your gesture. I had thought the suspended ceiling was already there! An existing fixture that you'd asset stripped and left in disarray.

This casual misreading led us on to discussing room sheets and exhibition texts. I wondered if it would be more interesting if I wrote a text about your exhibition at Mega. Or better yet, maybe an exchange through email. A conversation between shows?

Alex Gawronski: It seems I have this ongoing 'issue' with many of my works which end up looking too much like the 'real world' and therefore become quasi-visible despite all the labour. I mean, that's obviously also the point. Glad to hear you enjoyed *Business. As Usual*. And this sounds interesting whatever way you want to work it.

TW: I like your description quasi-visible. One of the first times I saw your work in person was at AGNSW, for the National. It was your large industrial Carriageworks structure at the entrance. By no stretch invisible but I'd guess more than a few walked under it without noticing?

I'm interested in your exhibition title, the choice to return to a phrase from peak pandemic. There's a strong relationship between breakdown and visibility that also feels related to that time. Especially with regards to infrastructures. Like thinking about supply chains when the shelves are empty, or only noticing the plumbing when the water gets turned off. Or maybe as an alternative to that idea, do you think we've gotten to where broken things are so common they're also hard to see clearly or attend to? Contours lost within the rubble. Not sure if that's on the right track...

AG: Its funny re: the AGNSW iteration of The National works - someone incidentally said to me that someone they knew thought the structure was functional scaffolding the gallery had simply neglected to

take down - which is pretty funny give the scale of the work - while a visiting curator (those meetings always seem retrospectively pointless and ludicrously lopsided to me) mentioned that they thought, even though the work was as large as it was, as a gesture it somehow still felt 'light', which I appreciated as I am really not into 'monumental sculpture' and its legacies - unless I'm going to be commenting on those conceptually/politically.

The *Business. As Usual* phrase definitely harks back to Covid times when people swore there'd be no return to it - but here we are with all the worst austeritarian/authoritarian aspects of neoliberalism - or even post-neoliberalism - back in full swing suggesting, as we always suspected, that the capitalist powers that be would never allow a loosening of their hold over the 'common folk'. The title also alludes to the fact that 'business' seems the pathetically narrow default of our era - as though anything that wasn't business-aligned wasn't worthwhile - and we see this all across the contemporary art field as well.

The literal in/visibility factor is also intentional as in a lot of my works, and implicitly extends to a critique of commonly held assumptions that the more visible something/someone is, the better it/they are. Endemic recourse to social media obviously exacerbates this attitude where grown adults behave like teenagers craving more and more popularity as though the drive to popularity 'itself' was a legitimate or meaningful ambition. The same goes for the system we live under where the expectation of endless expansion, in the guise of profit-seeking, is considered an actual possibility not an oxymoron. Contrarily, I would argue that the most impactful structures that condition our lives are invisible, everywhere felt but not seen.

TW: I might be imagining this but it feels like I'm hearing the pandemic/lockdowns mentioned in conversation more this year. At least more than the last couple. After initial overexposure and then repression, some of those strong feelings of antipathy are softening. Time has passed and people are now okay speaking about it without rolling their eyes? Lockdowns are remembered with a foggy fondness instead, especially by those who received increased financial support from the Australian Government. For some, boosted welfare schemes provided a financial stability only dreamt of now. And it does feel like our current moment is in some ways defined by that start to the decade. By what happened, but equally by what was prevented from happening. There was some smouldering possibility for change that was quickly stamped cold. The revelation never fully showed itself and we reverted back full swing like you say.

I read the statement you wrote for *Business. As Usual* and I liked the final sentence, about not wanting to illustrate the conditions of our time but echo a pervasive global mood. To me the work is very successful in doing that. Maybe I was trying to articulate something similar, about a single broken system being hard to see/define amidst multiple interconnected crises. A mood of desperation, disarray and breakdown also feels like an echo in your work for Mega.

I'm interested in the principles of salvage. Not those driven by value recuperation in an asset stripping sense but more by the repressed idiosyncrasy of outmoded and broken things. I'm drawn to objects that hold an imprint of their time, its motivations and desires, however feeble or unimpressive those residues are. There's this feeling that we inherit it all against our will, good and bad.

What do you do with an exhibition like *Business. As Usual* when it finishes. Does it all get boxed up and put in storage? Does the work go somewhere?

AG: In terms of the affective sense of collapse in my Mega work, today I find it unavoidable seeing as we are experiencing an extremely transparent socio-political collapse where all 'democratic' pretensions to civilised, rule-of-law governance - which had been pretty wafer thin for decades anyway for anyone paying attention - have been fully exposed. In fact, I find it incredible that people can ignore the reality of what is an epochal turning point in world history, the much-faster-than-anticipated collapse of Western (US) hegemony but also the violence this incurs everywhere else.

Salvage is an interesting notion, especially when not deployed in its most literalist sense (i.e. art attempting to single-handedly save the environment which is just laughable). I always appreciated Walter Benjamin's writing on Surrealism and that movement's repeated focus on the 'left-over' and discarded brought back to life: the abandoned aspect of things conferring on them a spectral, uncanny sensibility once they've passed beyond mere utility. There's also something inherently critical about salvage particularly in an age that adores the fantasy of the 'immateriality' of contemporary technologies when in fact such technologies, like the internet, cloud capital, AI etc. etc. rely so heavily on 'old-fashioned' natural resources, water and energy. There's a great section in the short book 'Blue Monday: Stories of Absurd Realities and Natural Philosophies' by Robert Sumrell and Kazys Varnelis that highlights the extent of the typically disguised physical infrastructure that modern communication technologies depend on.

As for my installation 'remains' these days, everything I make gets reduced to components that get stored for re-use in different contexts or given away. I've refrained from making large-scale objects for ages just because I can't afford the money or space to keep adding to what I'm already storing. Paintings and photographic work are not so bad because those works are flat.

TW: I agree literal saving / salvation feels fanciful. Art won't save us. Smart green capitalism won't be saving us either. Yet maybe there are useful ideas we left behind, to be rediscovered while dredging the deepening junk piles. If peak pandemic offered some kind of revelation that was discarded, an antecedent to possibility might still be there a few years below the rubble? Maybe your title turns some of that earth over again.

The punctuation of your title reminds me of a venn overlap meme doing the rounds last year. Left circle labelled 'apocalypse' overlapping the right circle labelled 'having to go to work'. Business, as usual, within the apocalyptic and genocidal present, reading the Monday morning headlines (dread) on the train to work (double dread), but still spared from the big end of the necropolitical cudgel for now.

I connect with how you described sculptural leftovers and components. In Melbourne last year we had the inaugural Melbourne Sculpture Biennale. The title, or I suppose theme, was - *The Burden of Objects*. Seeing that announced I imagined the exhibition was about warehousing. Artists responding to the rising cost of a Kennards self storage unit. And then later reading the blurb on their website, it actually was kind of about that. Sculpture was framed by the curators as a uniquely burdensome field of activity due to the practical challenges of making it, moving it, and putting it somewhere out of the way. This reminds me of when I told the artist Spiros Panigirakis that I didn't own a car. He told me that sculpture is a driving practice. Maybe it's also a storage practice.

All of this is top of mind for me while packing components and parts... artworks... to send ahead of me to Sydney. I'm mostly transporting office desks that I've been working with over recent years. I've compared some quotes. I've also looked online and seen a handful of the same desks listed for free or cheap around the city. They're already there and unwanted.

The desks I've bought or found have a mixed history, definitely a few jettisoned from suburban homes but also commercial offices. Recently I collected 7 from a law firm closing in South Yarra. They came from a room that looked a lot like your installation at Mega.

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